Nature Roars. Washington Ignores.

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Body

As if this past summer of merciless heat waves, droughts and megafires were not warning enough, in the past several days the elements sounded another alarm about the state of a world made warmer by the burning of fossil fuels. It came in the form of a one-two punch of wind and rainfall from Hurricane Florence, which like Hurricane Harvey a year ago, has derived much of its wallop from unusually warm ocean waters and stalled weather systems linked to climate change. "Supercharged" is the word one prominent climate scientist, Michael Mann, used to describe Florence, echoing the findings of the federal Global Change report in 2014 that, along with a rise in other extreme weather events, "hurricane intensity and rainfall are projected to increase as the climate continues to warm."

To no one's surprise, this linkage went unacknowledged in President Trump's Washington. Quite the contrary. On Tuesday, in a further retreat from President Barack Obama's ambitious promises to reduce America's emissions of the greenhouse gases deemed largely responsible for global warming, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed weakening rules aimed at reducing leaks of methane from oil and gas operations. Methane, a principal component of natural gas, is a short-lived but potent greenhouse gas that represents about 9 percent of this country's total greenhouse gas emissions; one-third of it comes from oil and gas operations.

Though the changes seem small -- reducing the frequency of inspections and fixes to wells and pipelines, for instance -- they may well presage an administration decision to get out of the business of regulating methane altogether. (The Interior Department, in a companion move, is soon expected to release its own proposal to roll back Obama-era rules regulating the venting and flaring of methane from drilling operations on the millions of acres under its control.)

The change in the methane rule is just plain dumb. The savings to industry would be trivial, $75 million a year by the Environmental Protection Agency's estimates, a rounding error for the powerful oil industry. The industry could in fact end up a loser, since captured methane can be sold at a profit. Moreover, leaking methane undercuts the industry's claim that natural gas can be a bridge fuel to a cleaner energy future. Though the burning of natural gas emits only about half the carbon dioxide of coal, the leak rate -- as high as 2.3 percent, according to studies organized by the Environmental Defense Fund -- erodes much of that advantage.

Finally, and most sadly, the change pretty much completes the demolition job on Mr. Obama's climate strategy: the rollback of automobile fuel efficiency standards announced in August; the planned repeal, also announced last month, of Mr. Obama's Clean Power Plan aimed at reducing emissions from coal-fired power plants; and now the methane pullback. These three programs, plus an effort to regulate climate-forcing gases used in refrigerants, formed the basis for Mr. Obama's pledge at the 2015 climate summit in Paris to reduce America's greenhouse gas output by 26 to 28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025.

To redeem that pledge -- and to reassure the other signatories of the Paris agreement that much of America still cares about climate change -- was the purpose of the Global Climate Action Summit, an extraordinary gathering last week of 4,000 or so climate advocates, foreign dignitaries, investors and state and local officials. The meeting, co-hosted by Gov. Jerry Brown of California and Michael Bloomberg, the former New York mayor, was a bright spot in a week dominated by atmospheric fury in the Carolinas and political fecklessness in Washington.

Unlike the Paris summit, the meeting had no power to set goals or to legally commit anyone to do anything to reduce emissions. What it did have was messaging power. And the message was one of defiance as well as concern.

According to a report prepared for the conference, the states, cities and businesses that have joined the cause -- what Mr. Brown and Mr. Bloomberg call the ''coalition of the willing'' -- now represent over half the population of the United States, over half the American economy and more than a third of its nationwide greenhouse gas emissions. Thanks partly to their efforts (plus, of course, market forces, not least the declining cost of renewable energy sources and the switch in the power sector from coal generation to natural gas), the United States is almost halfway to meeting Mr. Obama's Paris pledge. Simply honoring existing commitments and policies at the state and local level will get the country two-thirds of the way there.

The tough part is the rest of the journey, and to that end, the report offers strategies that it believes state and local governments can undertake without any help from Mr. Trump. Most are familiar: tougher ordinances to encourage more energy-efficient buildings, stronger state mandates for renewable energy sources like wind and solar power, more rapid deployment of electric vehicles (as California requires) and efforts to begin phasing out the super-polluting compounds used in commercial and residential cooling systems. And, as if in direct rebuke to Mr. Trump, the group called for new and tougher state and local regulations to stop methane leaks from oil and gas wells and municipal distribution systems.

Uniting these leaders is a belief that human ingenuity can lead us out of a predicament that humans have helped create and a faith in collective action that is almost impossible to find on the Potomac.

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